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# The Genre of the Near Future: Kim Stanley Robinson's New York 2140

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Genre

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## **The Genre of the Near Future: Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140***

This essay explores Kim Stanley Robinson's attempt to write a fiction of the near future in *New York 2140* (2017), and how the novel's treatment of time and history relates to its generic identity. The near future is defined in John Clute and Peter Nicholl's standard reference work, *The Encyclopedia of Science-Fiction*, as 'a world which is imminently real – one of which we can have no definite knowledge, which exists only imaginatively and hypothetically, but which is nevertheless a world in which (or something like it) we may one day have to live, and towards which our present plans and ambitions must be directed' (856-8). As useful as this is, 'imminently real' occludes difficult questions about temporal and mimetic proximity which Robinson brings to the fore. *New York 2140* is peculiar, in the first instance, for the directness with which it broaches the presentism that is said to characterize our era, the widespread belief that substantial change for the better is nigh-on impossible: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, as the tag-line has it.<sup>1</sup> In a talk given two years before the novel's publication Robinson trailed the core elements of its plot, introducing it as 'the story of how to get there [the utopian future] from here', and as 'a blueprint ... and an action plan' – though giving no hint that 'the utopian novel for our time' that he was describing would become an actual novel (2015). As its title suggests, *New York 2140* differs from the speech in projecting its plan into the twenty-second century; however, this projection actually allows the novel to encroach more effectively on the peculiar temporal and historical nature of the early twenty-first century 'here' in which Robinson's auditors were situated, and in which we, as readers, still remain. *New York 2140* thereby constructs a future that differs in significant ways from the kinds of future which are current in much contemporary scholarship and fiction, in particular those informed by the nonhuman conceptions of time which fall under the rubric of the Anthropocene; and the novel's temporal innovation is bound up with a generic one, which itself turns out to be, at heart, a grappling with questions of scale.<sup>2</sup>

This essay will suggest that in its imbrication of the present with the future *New York 2140* resembles not so much science fiction – the genre commonly associated with the future – but the historical novel, inheriting from its nineteenth-century exemplars and moving beyond its postmodern incarnations in such a way that it comes to seem the genre's logical successor. And just as *New York 2140* marks a temporal innovation in the historical novel, so it does in its treatment of the problematic question of how to manage the relationship between individual and general, particular and universal, which has always lain at the heart of both critical and creative treatments of the genre. Robinson's text not only shows this scalar challenge to be of particular importance to our historical moment, but reconfigures how some of its major coordinates – such as the economy, the environment, the body, and narrative itself – map across the gap between micro and macro. In doing so, however, it draws heavily on allegory, in a way that not only recalls the problems that mode has posed to previous critical treatments of the

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<sup>1</sup> The winding provenance of which is now almost as well-known as the quote itself: Fredric Jameson attributing it to 'someone' (2003: 76) who might be Slavoj Žižek in the process of attributing it to Jameson (1994: 1).

<sup>2</sup> As will become clear, this essay accords with recent genre theory that sees genre as the form of the novel in combination with historical process, and bound up with periodization, rather than as a fixed bundle of traits. For which see, for example, Ralph Cohen (1991) and Hayden White (2003).

historical novel, but also suggests why *New York 2140* is such an outlier in current fictional treatments of the near future. Instead, the novel might be contemporaneously situated alongside a range of cross-disciplinary texts which Robinson himself has labelled ‘utopian non-fiction’ (2015), such as those written by Naomi Klein, David Harvey and Bill McKibben. In this generic configuring the fictionality of *New York 2140*, and the complex narrative operations it performs, might trouble the kinds of future produced by its non-fictional confrères. Conversely, however, such a configuring might also reshape how those narrative operations, which I will track through this essay, are themselves received.

## The Time of the Near Future

Amy J. Elias has provided one of the best recent analyses of how the future takes form in contemporary culture, in a reading that also points towards a different conceptualization of time which has gained increasing amounts of traction in recent years. In revisiting the presentism which theory has so often portrayed as characterizing a globalized, postmodern world – the sense ‘that we may be incarcerated in the present’ – Elias describes our sense of the past as a kind of retrofuturism, in which ‘past utopian futures’ are redeployed, thereby reminding us that ‘all forms of futurism or utopianism are naïve and doomed to fail’ (2016: 40); while we are simultaneously caught in the ‘slipstream’ of a future that this reconfigured past tells us is already in place, and towards which we are therefore helplessly ‘dragged forward’ (2016: 44). However, as a possible alternative to this Elias speculatively identifies ‘a third space ... to think historical time’ (2016: 44) that would be ‘a geologic and environmental one’, such that historiography ‘needs to develop a wider analysis of capital *and the planet* if it is to understand what “future” may mean, next’ (2016: 46, *italics original*). The essay concludes before it can consider what kinds of narrative might represent this third space; however, such a shift towards the non-human planetary time of the Anthropocene has become an increasingly common critical manoeuvre in recent years. Kate Marshall, for instance, has argued that it is no longer possible to read contemporary literature ‘without reference to the geological concept of the Anthropocene’ (523); while Mark McGurl has described how different theoretical and methodological approaches concerned with geological time together constitute a ‘New Cultural Geology’ (2011).

This concern with deep time makes for an illustrative opening contrast with *New York 2140*, whose sense of the future seems markedly anthropocentric in comparison, concerned with human rather than geologic time-scales: indeed, notwithstanding its’ obvious futural aspects, which I will address shortly, the novel seems in many ways to be so close to our historical moment as to be almost indistinguishable from it. One example of this temporal encroachment is the novel’s numerous inter-chapter epigraphs, none of which postdate its publication – unlike in Robinson’s previous novel *2312* (2012), where the equally proliferate inter-chapter material consisted of extracts from invented future texts. *New York 2140* thereby builds the impression of a thickly textured historical past feeding into a present that is not so much 2140 as 2017. The characters’ frame of reference often appears circumscribed by that horizon: *Diary of a Bad Year* (2010), by ‘HFM, the anonymous hedge fund manager’, is referred to with the assumption of a familiarity and relevance more appropriate to a book published seven – rather than a hundred

and thirty – years ago (2017: 319); a recalcitrant government official is told to ‘remember Paulson’ of 2008 fame, lest he also be remembered as a ‘chicken and a sleaze’ (587); Volcker and Greenspan are invoked to similar effect (435); the rich still congregate annually in Davos (189, 381) and Thomas Piketty’s analysis of capital in the twenty-first century is still current (151-2). Even the future history that is provided by the chapters accorded to ‘the citizen’, in an over-viewing account of the events leading up to 2140, seems to consist of our current historical moment, repeatedly cycled through. Thus, while it describes the catastrophe that follows from the first ‘Pulse’ or climate disaster, the account also notes that ‘a certain particular one percent of the population, that just by chance rode things out rather well’ responded with more of the same: ‘On we go with the show!’ (141). The second disaster – which, even geophysically, is ‘just more of the same, but doubled’ (143) – leads to a similar continuation, with the exception that the ‘lucky one percent’ move their center of operations from New York to Denver, and ‘some social experimentation at the drowned margin’ occurs, with the implication that this ‘irate populace’ (145) has the potential to make a different kind of future. This environmental repetition is then synched to a political and economic one, as the disasters trigger financial crashes that lead to bank bailouts which are as ‘huge’ as they ‘[a]lways are’ (207).

In its encroachment on our present *New York 2140* resembles not so much other, current theorisations of the future, as descriptions of ‘the contemporary’ by scholars such as Terry Smith (2009) and Giorgio Agamben (2009), as a being in time that is also out of it, and not fully coincident with the present; while the novel’s very obvious and literalizing futurity – see the title, or the cover depicting a spectacularly flooded and futuristic New York – underscores Elias’s elaboration of this insight, that any theorisation of the contemporary is also an active and creative construction of the future (2014). Indeed, *New York 2140* confirms this point by reversing its direction of travel, advertising itself as a description of the future while moving surreptitiously backwards in time, towards the present – remaking what is to come such that the contemporary moment is, ipso facto, also remade. Something very similar might be said of any treatment of the future, of course; but what distinguishes Robinson’s text is the condensed and anthropocentric nature of this temporal hybridity, and its intense and self-conscious convergence on the present.

If the recognition of the impact of human activity on the planet that is named by the Anthropocene often seems to lead to a flight from the human into chastening perspectives on geological time, then *New York 2140* reverses this: the degradation of the biosphere is synched to freemarket capitalism in such a way that emphasis falls on the human timescales and vulnerabilities of the latter, rather than the vast indifference of the former. Similarly, if the turn to geological time often resembles a last-ditch attempt to smash the glass bubble of the present – not dissimilar in this regard to the narratives of apocalypse that have proliferated in recent decades – then *New York 2140* responds to the problem of presentism by staging it: showing the near future as stuck in a perpetual rerun of the 2008 crash and its aftermath. The crucial twist, however, is that the 2008 crash is diagnosed as a missed opportunity for an ‘irate populace’ to achieve change, which will necessarily recur given the unstable dynamic of finance capitalism. The presentism of the novel’s future might therefore feel like the familiar one of post- World War 2 global capitalism – and might indeed be that one. But its deathless and deadly repetitions also reproduce the crack in the carapace that was the 2008 crash, which, in Robinson’s reading, revealed finance capitalism as permanently vulnerable to breakdown, and

so to an overthrowing by organized, mass, democratic action. By telling the story of the present in the further future, the novel gives the former a dual nature: it is static, as is reflected in its continuation over a century into the future; and it is charged with forward motion, as is reflected in the novel's account of societal change prior to, and then through, an economic crash. And in imbricating present and future in this way, the novel prevents a paradigm-altering Event – technological or apocalyptic – slipping between them to offer a more convenient transition into a future. This imbrication finds its perfect expression in the novel's headline futural feature, a flooded New York: which is both disaster (the seas have risen) and opportunity (people have creatively responded to it); both the grim present (there has already been such flooding) and a potentially better future (it can lead to positive change). The inundated city, in this account, can stand as a figure for the contemporary.

As we have seen, this convergence on the present distinguishes *New York 2140* from influential critical discourses concerning the future; but it also marks it out from other classes of novel which are commonly seen as trafficking in the near future, which generally do rely on some kind of paradigm-altering Event – whether presented with a realist conviction or self-consciously as a fictional device – to establish the future they deal with. For instance, the new technologies of *New York 2140* – blimps, sky villages, building materials – feel like variations on the sort of historically frictionless newness that characterizes the present moment, rather than undergirding a new historical paradigm and determining the plot – compare, for instance, the role of biotech in Paolo Bacigauipi's *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009), or 3D printers and digital posthumanism in Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017). Similarly, while the sea rise described in *New York 2140* is catastrophic, this catastrophe is just 'more of the same', rather than a slate-cleaning event of apocalyptic proportions, such as defines Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-13), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). And while Robinson labelled his speech a 'utopian novel', and routinely describes his work along such lines, the focus on 'how to get there from here' distinguishes *New York 2140* from classic utopian fiction, which typically relies on a more flagrantly fictive ellipsis between present and future (or current and different reality) to effect the transfer between them: so, the protagonist falls into a coma in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), or is switched into a parallel world in H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Similarly, it differs from the so-called 'critical utopias' which emerged in the late '60s, which might have focused, like *New York 2140*, on the tangled emergence of a different society from an 'originary world' (Moylan, 36), but in doing so still relied on some form of foundational gap from the historical present, whether it be the mystery of time travel (Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 1976) or simply being set on other planets (Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, 1974; Samuel R. Delany's *Triton*, 1976; Robinson's own *Mars* trilogy, 1992-6).<sup>3</sup> Finally, *New York 2140* can be distinguished from the works of William Gibson – perhaps the contemporary writer most commonly associated with the near future – in that it is concerned with large-scale, societal change, in a manner that will be discussed further below; whereas Gibson's fiction

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<sup>3</sup> Given Robinson's knowledge of the genre – as practitioner but also as student and theorist – the labelling of his revolutionary plan as a 'blueprint' can be taken as a conscious revision of Tom Moylan's original account of critical utopias as 'reject[ing] utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream' (36).

typically retains a tight focus on a relatively context-less group of characters, and takes more from subgenres such as the adventure and heist narrative.<sup>4</sup>

While *New York 2140* might differ from most of its peers in science fiction, the genre commonly associated with depictions of the future, in its overlapping encroachment on the present it can be seen instead as a strange continuation of the developmental parabola of the historical novel, at least as Lukács conceived it in his influential account of the genre (1963): whereby the past comes increasingly closer to the literal present as the genre evolves through the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> One might say that in Robinson it has come so close that it has pushed through the present and out into the other side: a breakthrough which might, in retrospect, be seen as always having been latent in the genre, given its concern – at least in one branch of its ancestry – with the collective, revolution, radical change and progress.<sup>6</sup> In this account Robinson's text also re-sutures the twin strands of history and romance which are constitutive of the genre, and whose relationship Elias has described as undergoing a reversal in the post-1960s 'metahistorical romance' which developed out of the nineteenth-century historical novel (2001: 169-70) – examples include Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1995), and Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* (1999) – such that the 'historical side' which had been 'the dominant of [Walter] Scott's generic form' was subdued to 'the romance side of the [generic] equation' (2001: 164). *New York 2140* recovers the faith in a stadialist view of history that was dominant in Scott's version of the historical novel; however, it does so by moving into the future, thereby privileging the non-historical, fictional aspects of the genre which predominated in its postmodern incarnations. This convergence of history and fiction on a point in the future was famously posited as a necessary next step for the historical novel by Fredric Jameson – 'our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well' (2013: 313) – and was always at least implicit in his interest in science fiction and utopia. However, Jameson's account does not consider the temporal and realist proximity or otherwise of such 'historical futures' to the present, and what might be the consequences of such a proximity, or the lack of it; while an unignorable design upon the present moment is one notable feature of *New York 2140*, as we have seen. The consequences of this difference will be explored further in the final section of the essay.

## Genre and Scale

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of scale – and so of genre – also distinguishes Robinson's novel from Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), which describes a catastrophic near future flooding of New York.

<sup>5</sup> See also Richard Maxwell's description of how 'the past to which the novelist reaches out [in the nineteenth century] gets nearer. It is always located behind us, but – as in Zeno's paradoxes – the gap continually narrows' (67).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one might see this breakthrough as equally latent in some critical accounts of the genre: both Maxwell (108) and Harry E. Shaw (54) turn to science fictional accounts of the future – Jules Verne's *Les Indes-Noir* (1887) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), respectively – without commenting on the obvious distinction that these historical novels are not, unlike the rest of their corpus, set in the historical past.

The hypothesis that *New York 2140* might represent an evolutionary next-step in the historical novel receives further support from the fact that questions of scale are central to both. As Harry E. Shaw put it in his major study of the genre, it ‘raises in an acute form a question common to all mimetic works of art – the relationship of the individual to the general, of particulars to universals’ (30); while the chapters devoted to ‘the citizen’ in *New York 2140* go so far as to explicitly reflect on this issue, and its relationship to historiography and narrative – ‘... history is another particle/wave duality that no one can parse or understand’ (603) – in a manner that recalls the philosophical discussions in that most historically ambitious of all historical novels, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1867). As noted above, the concern with scale is also what distinguishes Robinson’s novel from the work of perhaps the most well-known fictional traverser of the near future, William Gibson; and as we will see, the difficulties consequent on handling this issue suggest one reason why *New York 2140* is so unusual, in contemporary fiction, for occupying the generic and temporal territory it does.

However, just as *New York 2140* marks a temporal innovation in the historical novel, for moving its sphere of operations into the future, so it is similarly innovative in its treatment of scale: not only positioning the challenges it presents as in many ways constitutive of our historical moment, but also performing drastic revisionary work on how that scalar structure is understood and might come together.<sup>7</sup> In the first instance this can be seen in the way in which Robinson’s text populates the scalar poles – particular and universal, individual and general – which structure the genre. Both Lukács and Jameson describe this relationship as the tension between “‘world-historical”, which is to say, “real” historical characters’, and the ‘collectivity ... nation, people or multitude’ (Jameson 2013: 280), with the core ‘issue’ being ‘the representation of a collectivity by individual characters’ (2013: 282). In *New York 2140*, however, this does not seem to be the case, and not just because its ‘real’ historical characters – Paulson, Volcker, Bernanke – are part of its projected past. Rather, Robinson replaces the tension between world-historical figures and the multitude with a reciprocal relationship between maximal systemic structures – economics, the law, the city itself – and the individuals that flow through them, so giving life to those structures and determining their own individual and collective identity in a dynamic that recalls the hermeneutic circle. The description of these structures principally takes place through chapters accorded to ‘the citizen’, which differ from the novel’s other chapters – each one focalized through a single character – in several respects: the citizen is not dramatized, and does not engage with the other characters via the plot; he directly addresses the reader to provide overviewing accounts of the novel’s wider setting and history. The implication, then, is that any ‘individual’ encountered in the drama of the other chapters, and who seems to gain an importance equivalent to ‘world-historical’ status, might be substituted by, or replicated with, any number of others; as the citizen remarks at the conclusion, ‘[n]ote that this flurry of social and legal change did not happen because of ... [any] single individual’ (603). This means that revolution need not wait on the appearance of a leader, because the decisive operation they would have been relied on to set in motion and oversee is

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<sup>7</sup> For the central importance of scale to the current moment see, for example, Clark (2015).

perpetually latent within the present, requiring only mass participation to bring it into being.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the fictional use of the infrastructure in this way can be seen as an advance upon what Richard Maxwell has called the ‘siege novel’ of nineteenth-century France, whereby struggles on barricades and fortifications provided a novelistic means of narrating a ‘literally collective hero’, using a ‘mass protagonist [to] make mass struggle central’ (201). *New York 2140* becomes the successor to the politically left historical novel of the French nineteenth century – which Maxwell contrasts to the more conservative British strain that followed after Scott – by replacing revolutionary violence with the non-violent harnessing of the civilizational infrastructure, as the means of effecting radical change.

If this reconfiguration of the scalar framework in the citizen’s chapters is explicit, then in the chapters featuring the other, interrelated and emplotted characters – which form the bulk of the text and its recognizably ‘novelistic’ matter – *New York 2140* relies instead on a dramatization which invites an allegorical reading as a means of bridging the scalar gap between individual (instance, person) and general (history, society). To take perhaps the clearest example, the utopian ‘action plan’ outlined in Robinson’s speech – in which a mass debt default by coordinated individuals brings about an economic crisis which allows the banks to be nationalized – is triggered in the novel in a scene featuring three characters: Amelia, an emotional and impulsive ‘cloud’ (read, internet/social media) star concerned with environmental issues; Charlotte, a social worker at the Householders’ Union, influential in her own building’s cooperative-like management, and involved in politics at various levels; and Franklin, a hedge-fund manager who starts the novel as an egocentric playboy, but gradually becomes more collectively minded. The plan is triggered when Amelia speaks on a whim to her huge cloud audience, while taking advice from Franklin and Charlotte, who are situated together elsewhere and talking to her through her earpiece, ‘in rapid counterpoint, having a real-time little editing war over what she should say’ (528). Charlotte is easily glossed as the strategizing community organizer; Franklin as the ultimate social competitor; while Amelia’s character exemplifies instinctive play, lived – as opposed to organized – community. The breakout from finance capital’s capture of history therefore occurs when Amelia’s phenomenological vitality enters impulsively into the ‘plan’ while assimilating strategic direction from the avatars of politics (Charlotte) and finance (Franklin), or communal co-operation and competition.

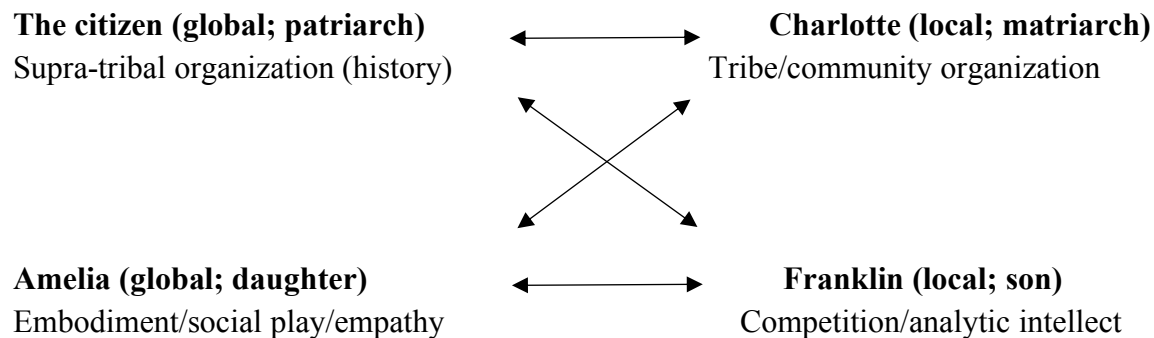
However, while in this reading the allegory of the novel is simply concerned with bridging the gap between micro and macro, in the classic manner of the historical novel, taken as a whole the text can be seen as also actively trying to recode the key scalar co-ordinates for the contemporary moment, from the socio-cultural to the environmental: to such an extent, indeed, that its entire operation is determined by this effort. To see how this is so it is first necessary to expand the allegoric triad of Amelia, Charlotte and Franklin into a quartet featuring the citizen. A basic prompt for this expansion comes from the fact that the key features of Robinson’s plan are distributed between these four; however, the most economical means of demonstrating the centrality of their relation is to place them into a ‘semiotic rectangle’ (figure 1), the analytical

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<sup>8</sup> Or at least, this is the ideal the novel puts forward, though it is notable that Charlotte’s ex-husband, Larry – a marginal character – is the head of the Federal Reserve, and his co-opting into the revolutionary plan facilitates its execution.



resource first explained by the semiotician A. J. Greimas (1987) and further developed by Jameson (1972, 1981).<sup>9</sup>



[figure 1]

On first reading the age gap between Charlotte and Franklin, who become a couple at the end of the novel, can seem a somewhat strangely insisted upon detail in the text, perhaps communicating how (male) romantic relationships need to rise above the superficial attractions of youthful beauty; however, the rectangle suggests that their union is driven by the need for youthful individualistic competitiveness to partner with mature communal governance. This gender and age bracketing in turn suggests the male citizen as father or patriarch, with his de-individualized, totalizing, God’s eye view of the world; and his opposition with Charlotte then articulates the need to reconcile the scalar extremes of history, the livable local (tribe, village, district) with what is beyond it (national, global); which is also to reconcile fictional with historical narrative. Perhaps the most surprising and productive clarification of the scalar dynamic occurs through Amelia. Though in some ways the most individual of the characters – both emotionally and physically, given her beauty and propensity for being naked – she is nevertheless planetary, in that she wanders all over the world in her blimp, looking at it from above, like the citizen, though with an affectual intensity and individualizing investment lacking in his narrative (and for the gender typing at work here, see below); similarly, her sociality is both intensely personal and global, in that she is a cloud star, communicating directly with millions. Such details are the narrative rationalization of the outrageous demand for an affectual – and thus, thanks to embodiment, inherently local or physically immediate – engagement with the global: a need which finds its closest actualizable expression in Amelia’s ecological work, a lived and intensely personal engagement that scales up to the planet via the interconnectivity of the biosphere, that realm in which individual human life is always already a conduit for the full range of planetary scale, from molecules to the sun. Conversely, if more straightforwardly, while Franklin is engaged in global finance at the novel’s outset, the rectangle clarifies how this is a scalar error, and that his analytical, intellectual, strategic strengths – as well as the economy in which they are put to work – need to root themselves in the local: a turn prefigured by his being frequently depicted out and about on the New York waters, and actualized by his later turn away from hedge funds to the construction of innovative low-cost housing in the city.

<sup>9</sup> For the ‘semiotic rectangle’ see also Phillip E. Wegner (2014: 81-118).

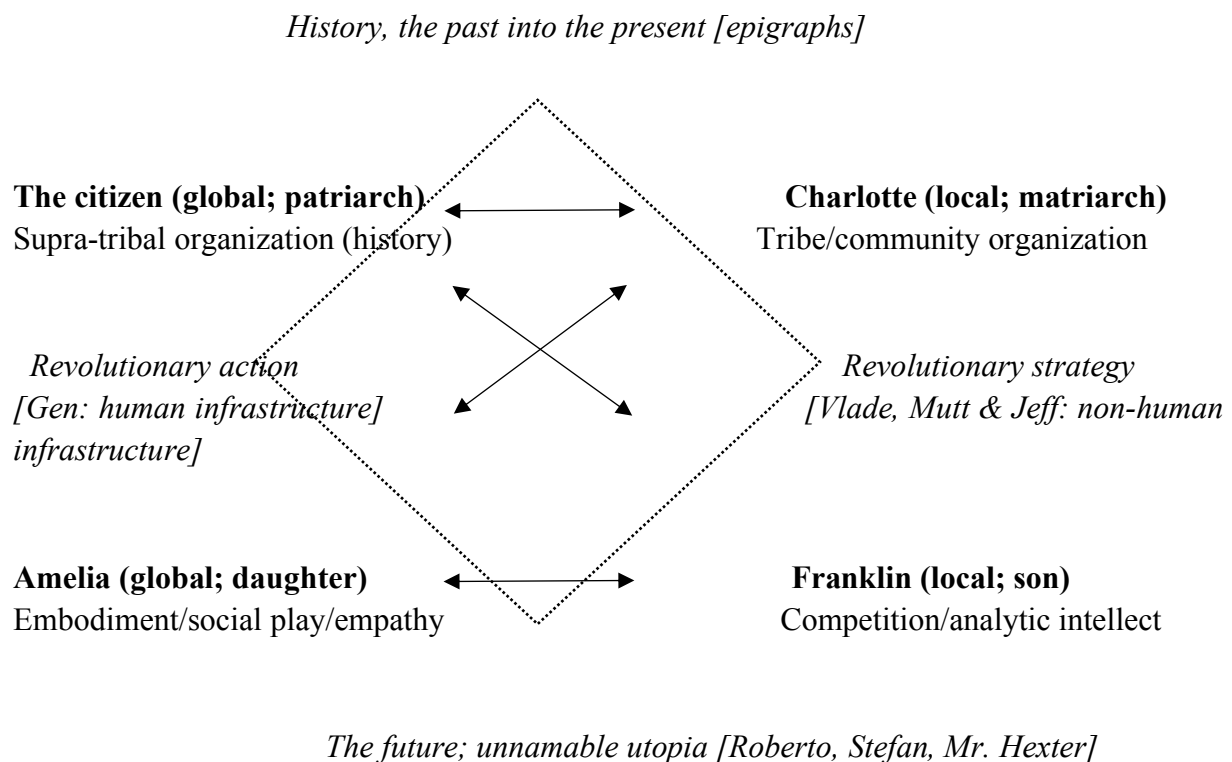
This dynamic, once established, can pull in other elements from the novel (see figure 2). The inter-chapter epigraphs – which are numerous enough to be considered an actor in their own right – span the scalar and generic extremes (universalizing definition and anecdotal instance; history/theory/fiction) expressed by the citizen and Charlotte. Their positioning as prefatory to the events of the novel – in every sense, including the most literal, in that they come before the chapters – also means they reverse the ‘retrofutur’ tendency identified by Elias in contemporary culture: rather than being discrete ‘past utopian futures’ (2016: 40) recovered only in order to fail again, they become together the signs of a future which is multifarious as utopia itself, and distributed through the past as a collection of dots whose joined form wavers now on the edge of emergence. In this operation they also both resemble and break from ‘the constant, recursive movement towards history and back again’ without ‘resolution’ and ‘closure’, which Elias has elsewhere described as the ‘central characteristic’ of the postmodern ‘metahistorical romance’ which she has analyzed so brilliantly. The epigraphs create a comparable dialogue between *New York 2140* and the past, but in such a way that it converges on a programmatic and coherent line into the future, rather than sustaining a dialogic play of difference; however, given that this convergent dialogue is implicitly in argument with other, similarly programmatic historical narratives, and given that the past is being put into dialogue with the (speculative) future rather than the (theoretically knowable) present, it resembles the postmodern ‘metahistorical’ novel in lacking the telos of narrative closure. However, this lack becomes less a reflection of the uncertainty and constructedness of the present, and more an embrace of the future’s creative openness, in the spirit of such utopian theorists as Jameson and Ernst Bloch.<sup>10</sup>

Charlotte and Franklin bring together intellectual and strategic modes which find expression in the need for organizing frameworks, material and abstract infrastructures, whose importance we have already noted as part of the novel’s inheritance from the French nineteenth century ‘siege’ or revolutionary novel. Vlade manages the physical building, Mutt and Jeff are quants or coders concerned with the possibility of managing the legal and economic infrastructure. Expressing a parallel concern with this possibility is Inspector Gen, a policewoman, who is generated by the tensioned alignment between global history and the universal human body: a perhaps surprising conjunction, suggesting how the revolutionary event will require a reflexive self-governance as much as immersive engagement, of the sort that Gen does indeed display during the potentially catastrophic city riots, now revealed as a cipher for mass revolutionary action which needs to be contained and redirected rather than unleashed (it is also notable, given the global convergence here, that the crowd at one point appears to be made up of ‘people who didn’t appear to speak English or any other language’,

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<sup>10</sup> With regard to current historiography, the epigraphs also mime the relationship which Reinhart Koselleck describes between the ‘structures which condition and limit room for maneuver in the future’, which history detects in past events, and ‘the conditions of a possible future that cannot be solely derived from the sum of individual events’ which history simultaneously indicates (114). In displaying how the undetermined nature of the future gives unusually free play to intention and bias in determining the selection and use of past ‘evidence’, the epigraphs can also complicate David J. Staley’s account of how historians might ‘discern the patterns and meaning in the evidence’ (84) to write ‘histories of the future’.

512). All of which leaves as the ‘neutral term’ on the rectangle, and the utopian future produced by this ‘system in motion’ (Jameson 2013: 180), the unnamable combination of local intellect and global phenomenology, which finds its expression in two adventurous orphan boys, Roberto and Stefan, and their elderly, aesthetically-inclined, history-steeped mentor, Mr. Hexter.<sup>11</sup> In this combination they fuse the rectangle’s binaries of youth/vitality, age/experience, mind/body; they also suggest that what will characterize the otherwise indescribable future are play and curiosity of one sort or another, but always rooted in one’s lived environment: natural ecosystems (the waters, weather and wildlife that the boys encounter) melding with human ones (art and local history as Mr. Hexter channels them). Finally, this nexus also suggests the novel’s uncanny capaciousness with regard to its inheritance from the historical novel. As we have seen, *New York 2140* recalls the nineteenth-century French ‘siege novel’; however, the antiquarian interests and narrative arc of Mr. Hexter also recall what Maxwell calls ‘the meta-narrative of the French historical novel’, which is ‘the story of the how the [conservative, historically detached] antiquary becomes a revolutionary’ (104); while the involvement of the children does something similar, with regard to revolution, for the British children’s fiction of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, which Maxwell identifies as another major line of descent for the historical novel.



(figure 2)

<sup>11</sup> See Jameson (2013: 179-81) for the identification of the neutral term with the Utopian.

Northrop Frye famously argued that all critical commentary is a form of allegory;<sup>12</sup> more pertinent to our discussion is the key role it plays in the historical novel, as a means of negotiating between particular and universal. In one form or another this negotiation has been central to all major critical treatments of the genre, though not in such a way, perhaps, that they settle the question implicitly raised by Robinson's text: what stops this becoming an overdetermined and schematic rendering, devoid of fictional life? For instance, in Lukács' account the breach in scale is bridged by 'typical' characters who possess 'capacities and propensities which when intensified illuminate the complex dialectic of the major contradictions, motive forces and tendencies of an era' (158);<sup>13</sup> with such intensification to be distinguished from schematic allegory, a turgid and predetermined 'tableau' (116). How? It is at this point that Lukács' distinction becomes unclear, relying on a suggestive but elusive language of dynamism and plenitude to maintain the difference between good and bad work: the former being 'rich and dynamic' (121), involving 'typical characters with a richly developed inner life are tested in practice' (124), 'a moving human drama' (141). Shaw also seems to suggest that too overt a presence of historical allegory – the term he uses is 'symbol', but it possesses the same scale-bridging function – 'helps to impoverish the depiction both of history and of human complexity as well' (102); though the desirable resolution he alights on – a balance between a maximal scale equated with the historical and schematic, and a micro level equated with 'human experience' (48) and the particular – possesses something of the elusive quality of Lukács' typicality, such that it can appear a rephrasing of the original question as much as an answer to it.

Perhaps the most productive critical treatment has been Jameson's, which is elusive in a different fashion, as the concern with the depiction of the totality that is central to historical fiction also runs through all his work, though in different guises. Of immediate obvious relevance is his conception of national allegory, first discussed in *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis or, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979), and then more notoriously in a later essay which argued that Third World texts 'necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory' (1986: 89). The controversy this statement generated is less relevant here than the continuity through both accounts of a concern with the figuration of the large-scale through individual experience, which then continues into Jameson's later and equally well-known concept of 'cognitive mapping', where the totalizing descriptive project shared by realism and Marxism would be enabled by the imaginary projections and mythic conversions normally associated with the romance, as Robert T. Tally Jr. has helpfully explained (2014). Perhaps Jameson's critical innovation in this context is almost so obvious, or so foundational, as to be easily missed: the conception of history as itself perpetually elusive and under (re)construction, such that it is not some objective truth to be projected more or less schematically, but an emergent property of each text, not necessarily synchronizing with that text's conscious representational intentions. This could be seen as a simple gloss on the hermeneutics of suspicion, but that would be to miss the generative implications of this position,

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<sup>12</sup> Frye commented that '[i]t is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation' (89). For a historical contextualization of Frye's position see Jon Whitman (2000).

<sup>13</sup> See also the complementary phrasing in Lukács' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*: 'the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found [in typical characters] in concentrated form' (1969: 122).

which is better understood by aligning history with utopia, that other critical term which has been a persistent feature of Jameson's thinking: so, both History and Utopia as a totalizing poetics of the Real, always catalytically there but beyond conclusive reach. Indeed, Jameson can be seen as performing a recuperative glossing of Lukács in this spirit, such that the elusiveness in the dynamism and plenitude described above is not a weakness of Lukács' account but an oblique figuring of history itself, which can be posited and glimpsed but nowhere fully substantiated (2012: 479).

In the light of this, while the reading of *New York 2140* produced thus far possesses its own, remarkable balance and concordance – the original 'blueprint' given three-dimensional life – it can also be seen as generating historical forces which that blueprint cannot encompass and which threaten it; a tension which also explains why Robinson's adoption of the historical novel into the proximate near future might be so exceptional in the contemporary literary landscape. We might start with the conservative and traditional gendering of the roles as they are mapped out above; such that the apparent outlier, Inspector Gen – a black, female cop – seems partly a token overstepping of stereotypes, and partly an instrumentalising feminization of institutional force. This comes to a head in the maleness of the neutral or utopian term: a gendering all the more pronounced for its plot vector being a hunt for buried treasure, that staple feature of the nineteenth-century imperial romance, notable for its belligerently troubled masculinity. While it is arguable that the boys and old man might be parsed as sexless rather than male, this is no less problematic, particularly given how the boys – who are any age between 'eight or twelve' (65) – must either be in, or hovering on the edge of, puberty: which means that in positioning them as the utopian term the novel either asks for the endless future maintenance of an asexual maleness, or invites its own disruption by the arrival of a sexuality that its dynamic cannot contain. In the light of this, the text's metafictional play with issues of record and invention, and its explicit documenting of the limitations of fiction in the citizen's chapters, can be seen as less a pre-emptive acknowledgment of the limits of fiction, and more as an attempt to buffer its unruly force, that libidinal lightning-jag which might break out from any 'action plan' or 'blueprint'.

The essentializing categories which shadow the text should be taken as less a sign of a regressive identity politics inherent to Robinson as a writer – *2312*, in contrast, offered a cheerfully inventive remixing of gender and sexuality – than of the way in which the reconciliation of micro with macro, such that the arrangement of characters bodies forth a larger historical dynamic, militates against the instabilities and hybridizations of which identity is capable, and the idiosyncratic micro landscapes of individual emotion and psychology, which together form the locus of much contemporary literary production. Of course, the relationship between difference and unity has been the subject of exploration since the time of the Greeks, was central to Hegelianism and Marxism, and runs in various incarnations through twentieth century critical theory; indeed, the totalizing allegoric operation of *New York 2140* might be set, along these lines, against the important role that alternative sexualities and a queering of gender have come to assume in utopian fiction and theory in the last few decades – including, as just noted, in Robinson's own fiction.<sup>14</sup> Still working within this frame, *New York 2140* can

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Samuel R. Delaney, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).

be seen as also trying to hedge against its own totalizing, with the various forms of play and embodied pleasure it depicts – from taking boats down a flooded Fifth Avenue to drinking wine at the end of a long day – providing a sort of undetermined phenomenological antechamber to the main hall in which allegoric identity goes about its business. Such a reframing still leaves some degree of categorization in place, but in a way that perhaps does more justice to Robinson's approach, which seems to imply that a fixed public function is required of each individual for a workable 'blueprint' to be carried out, rather than a fixed identity (gender, sexuality, ethnic) per se. However, *New York 2140* also suggests that such a reframing may still struggle to escape the gravitational pull of various forms of essentialization. It is telling in this regard that the old man/boy(s) relationship that is the utopian term in *New York 2140* reproduces the male master-disciple structure that was also central to Robinson's *Shaman* (2013), which recounted the life of a prehistoric tribe, a social unit which can be readily presented as made up of inherited roles primarily determined by gender (shaman, healer, hunter, mother), and which endow their holder with a degree of anonymity or standardization; and in that novel the disciple struggles against the regularization implicit in his taking up the role that was his master's. While *New York 2140*, in its programmatic optimism, intends to give no signs of such a struggle, it can be read as latently present within it.

### **The genre of here to there?**

As we have seen, in its didactic and pragmatic design on the present moment, *New York 2140* differs from much contemporary work in literary studies that deals with the future. However, the same factor might position it alongside other contemporary work that Robinson labelled – in the same speech from which this essay quoted at the start – 'utopian non-fiction', citing authors who have critiqued finance capitalism and described possible alternatives and strategies for resistance, on the national and international scale commensurate with the threat it poses. If the historical novel has always enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the historiography of its time, Robinson's text might be seen as enjoying such a relationship, instead, with a range of interdisciplinary popular narratives that are focused on large-scale change in the present, such that they immediately project the near future in addressing it; a temporal posture which takes the indeterminacy of history that preoccupied postmodernism, and refits it as an optimistic account of the pliability of the equally undetermined future. Indeed, Robinson's novel might be read as an unintended answer to the call sent out by George Monbiot in one such non-fiction work, *Out of the Wreckage* (2017), for 'a new story' (3) to replace the dominant cultural narrative of neoliberalism: such stories, we are told, are 'easy to understand ... can be briefly summarized and quickly memorized ... [possess] a direct connection between cause and effect' (183). In the abstract Robinson's novel can even sound like Monbiot's book inverted: a story plumped and braced with a radical leftish agenda backed up by a range of disciplinary evidence, beside a non-fiction book assembling a radical leftish agenda with a range of disciplinary evidence and calling for a new story to embody it. However, the very brittleness of Monbiot's narrative prescription also suggests the ease with which the actual fictionality of *New York 2140*, and the complex narrative operations it sets into play, might trouble the future that emerges in the work of its non-fictional confrères: for instance, by suggesting how the micro

scale of individuality – with all its contingency and fuzziness, multiplicity and idiosyncrasy – might complicate any projected blueprint or agenda.

Conversely, however, this resituating of *New York 2140* within a hypothetical genre that also contains such ‘utopian non-fiction’, might in turn alter how those narrative operations – of the kind that have been tracked through this essay – are received. To say that Robinson’s ‘blueprint’ summons contradictions undreamt of by that programme, and that the utopian term it signals towards cannot be adequately populated, feels like a familiar critical operation: *New York 2140* becomes just another example of utopian fiction as Jameson describes it, transmitting ‘feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change’ (2003: 76), but also an inevitable failure. However, Robinson is writing into a world in which this critical mapping is already well established, and the novel’s insistence on its relevance to the current moment – for instance, by sucking in swathes of ‘realist’ material which it is hard to read as anything other than diagnosis and instruction – can be read as a polite demurral from Jameson’s emphasis on the success through failure of utopian fiction, the way it shows ‘the contradictions in which we are ourselves imprisoned, the oppositions beyond which we cannot think’ (2013: 308): an emphasis which has perhaps come dangerously close to making our current stasis comfortable through the repeated, soothing assertion of the proximity of a change whose Eventual unforeseeability conveniently translates into the pointlessness of doing anything to try and bring it forward (not for nothing does *New York 2140* have two of its characters discuss *Waiting for Godot*).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in a 2016 speech Robinson introduced the same ‘action plan’ as features in the 2015 speech and *New York 2140* with the remarks:

... my old [PhD] adviser Fredric Jameson I think is the one who made up this saying: that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. And this has become one of the truisms of our time, one of the slogans of the postmodern era. And I’m thinking, I want to do what Fred would do and analyze this phrase a little bit more and actually look at the form of the content of this phrase rather than the phrase itself. ... [W]hat the phrase is really saying is it’s easier to imagine bad things than it is to imagine good things. Granted, OK: that’s probably true. ... But hope is tough and it continues to persist in all situations, so we were [sic] going to continue to hope our way forward here as I continue to attempt to find the lever to – Archimedes’ lever – to change the situation.

It would be too crude to say that in its commitment to finding such leverage *New York 2140* asks us to jettison the kinds of concerns about the forms of identity which this essay has read as being a potentially critical problem to it: everything about Robinson’s wider corpus suggests he is sensitive to such issues. Rather, it is as if the novel trusts that its reader will be aware of them, and that they will, in this sense, be appropriately taken care of; while what requires urgent dramatization in our time is the ‘blueprint or action plan’, whose mere existence, let alone legibility, seems the exceptional fact about *New York 2140* as a work of narrative fiction.<sup>16</sup> If

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<sup>15</sup> Also compare Bruno Latour’s recent account of ‘the ever-receding frontier of utopia’ (220).

<sup>16</sup> In this sense the novel is an example of the sort of ‘alternative vision of a collective future’ recently called for by Samuel A. Chambers, in a reading which pitches the kind of collectivity modelled by

there is a complication here it lies more in the fact that the force of this aspect of the novel surely does not rely on its ‘action plan’ being put into action *tout court*. Rather, the novel exemplifies how groups of individuals more or less like us – notwithstanding their allegoric freight, they are also happy and sad, they hope and they mourn – can, in organized combination and through the non-violent medium of politics, effect large-scale societal change: it is no coincidence that Charlotte is elected to Congress at the end of the novel.<sup>17</sup>

If this feels like an anticlimactic ending, then perhaps this is our problem rather than the novel’s: certainly, it is striking how absent is this kind of political dimension from the wider field of near future fiction and recent trends in literary criticism, and its corresponding importance to the hypothetical genre sketched here in the light of Robinson’s ‘utopian non-fiction’ descriptor.<sup>18</sup> As we have seen, the determining role which scale will play in this genre presents grave challenges to fiction – or, at least, fiction which treats with individual identity – such that *New York 2140* might be seen as either a bridge between them, or, perhaps more accurately, as a kind of eccentric annex to two structures which remain largely separate. Alternatively, one might view *New York 2140*’s energetic renovation of the historical novel, which has always been partly defined by its grappling with fictionality, as suggestive – maybe even predictive – of how other literary forms might more easily find a place in this new genre: the classic rather than ‘critical’ utopia, for instance, or the manifesto.<sup>19</sup> The contemporary moment as bound up with the near future and the past it simultaneously constructs in relation to it, as it grapples with the challenges posed by planetary scale: the genre of here to there, perhaps.

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Robinson’s text against the ‘individualistic (entrepreneurial)’ (731) political subjectivity produced by neoliberalism.

<sup>17</sup> The citizen makes the case – as does Robinson in his speeches – for the continued importance of the nation-state; and that the global dominance of the US, in everything from capital to carbon emissions, means that if it breaks good then the world will follow. How convincing this is, is less important here than the impatient brazenness with which it breaks the stranglehold of scale.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Ian Duncan’s seeming acceptance of the demise of the nation state as a locus for progressive change as a done deal; coupled with its replacement as a temporal horizon in fiction by the non-human scales of planet (2017). For more optimistic political prognoses from beyond literary criticism see for instance Monbiot (2017), or Becky Bond and Zack Exley’s account of effective large-scale left-wing political organizing (2016).

<sup>19</sup> Fredric Jameson’s *An American Utopia* (2016) could be seen as one recent descendent of the former; for a suggestive account of the contemporary place of the manifesto, see Hans Ulrich Obrist (2010).



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